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## **LINGUISTIC AMBIGUITY VERSUS VAGUENESS IN BRITISH PROVERBS**

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*Language, as the main communication tool, serves to deliver a desired message to the interlocutor. Discourse, however, sometimes implies multiple or imprecise meaning, i.e. it is ambiguous or vague. Many language areas and types of discourse are believed to employ the phenomena to achieve a desired effect. Indeterminacy in language could also be unintentional and happen accidentally. The present study aims at analysing the use of linguistic ambiguity and vagueness in one hundred British proverbs. Data for this research were chosen using a simple random sampling method from the Internet page 'Learn English Today'. The findings reveal only marginal differences in the quantitative use of these linguistic devices. The study also reports on the most prevalent functions performed by ambiguity and / vagueness.*

**KEY WORDS:** *linguistic ambiguity, vagueness, British proverbs.*

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### **Introductory remarks**

Both linguistic ambiguity and vagueness are related to indeterminacy in language or interpretive uncertainty. A considerable amount of literature has been published on these phenomena (Tanaka 1994, Varzi 2001, Pedersen 2002, Keefe 2003, Kennedy 2011), however, it remains unclear how they operate in the case of specific linguistic items such as proverbs.

The present study focuses on the use of linguistic ambiguity (an ability of a language unit and context to convey multiple linguistic messages) and vagueness (as a feature of a word or phrase that conveys indeterminate meaning) in one hundred British proverbs. It aims to analyse which linguistic device is more prevalent, whether the two devices can be used together in the same proverb, and determine the reasons for the use of ambiguity and vagueness in British proverbs.

## Linguistic ambiguity

A number of different classifications exist in the literature on linguistic ambiguity (cf. Marianne 2011, Chen 2012, Löbner 2013). Based on a combination of them, this linguistic phenomenon could be discerned in five main types: phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and contextual ambiguities.

The phonological type of ambiguity arises from homophones. *Eight* and *ate* could serve as an example of phonologically ambiguous words since they share the same pronunciation /eɪt/ but differ in meaning.

Morphological ambiguity is often attributed to the feature of inflectional morphemes to be ambiguous to such an extent that they could cause numerous misinterpretations (cf. Wasow, Perfors and Beaver 2005). For example, morphologically ambiguous phrase *Dahl's book* could be interpreted as a book belonging to Dahl or written by Dahl.

The third type of ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, can be noticed when no context is provided for words with multiple denotations, e.g. *bank* could refer to money or a river. This type, however, is not limited to content words, e.g. a function word *that* can be a determiner, a demonstrative pronoun, or a conjunction and thus be ambiguous when used out of context.

Bosch (1979) points out that “ambiguity is traditionally understood as that property of a sentence which makes it say something true and false at the same time” (Bosch 1979, p. 12), i.e. it is caused by ambiguous sentence structures. This type of ambiguity is defined as syntactic. One of the most productive sources of syntactic ambiguity are modifiers and prepositional phrases (Wasow, Perfors and Beaver 2005) because they can be easily attached to any sentence. For example, “*He left his car with his girlfriend*” (Zwicky and Sadock 1975, p. 10) can mean: (1) he and his girlfriend both left his car somewhere and (2) he left his car somewhere with his girlfriend in it.

Ellipsis is another possible cause for syntactic ambiguity. “*She loves her dog more than her child*” (Chen 2012, p. 2935) due to the elided part may be understood in two completely different ways: (1) *she prefers her dog to her child* and (2) *her child loves her dog less than she does*.

The last type, contextual ambiguity, “embraces the use of irony, metaphor, intentional double readings and other uses of ‘polysemy’” (Nerlich and Clarke 2001, p. 12). For example, since there is no water reservoir in the world known as the *sea of grief*, in order for the expression to be logical (*the great grief experienced by someone due to some disastrous event*) it must undergo metaphorical meaning shift. Contextual ambiguity should be seen as distinct from lexical ambiguity, because the meaning shift does not deal with different meanings of one word, but rather changes them slightly in order for an expression to fit the context.

## Vagueness

Vagueness, contrary to ambiguity, does not communicate multiple meanings, but rather suggests indeterminate, context-dependent understandings of an utterance. The role of

vagueness can be summarised as two-fold. On the one hand, it is a negative feature of a language yielding inaccuracy and the possibility of misunderstanding. On the other hand, “its positive functions include improving the flexibility of communication, enhancing the persuasiveness of communication and ensuring the accuracy of information” (Wenzhong and Jingyi 2013, p. 103). The main identified sources of vagueness are truth-value, borderline cases, the Sorites Paradox, and mathematical induction (broadly described by Bueno and Colyvan 2012).

Vagueness has received attention by a number of authors (Varzi 2001, Poscher 2012, Égré and Klinedinst 2011, etc.), who proposed different classification models. On the basis of Francis J. Pelletier and István Berkeley’s (1999), Aschille C. Varzi’s (2001), and Ralf Poscher’s (2012) classifications, the phenomenon may be discerned in three types: lexical, semantic and pragmatic, and higher-order vagueness.

Most research on lexical vagueness focuses on one word class, mostly on adjectives or quantifiers, though other parts of speech may also be vague. For example, Paul Égré and Nathan Klinedinst (2011) note that vague verbs may give rise to the Sorites Paradox: if a runner is walking  $n$  km/h, then he/she will still be walking if his/her speed constantly increases by one km/h. On the other hand, it is impossible to walk at 40 km/h, thus the assumption that if the speed constantly increases by one km/h, a person would still be walking is false and the verb is vague. As a result, the boundaries between the verbs *walk* and *run* are not clear, i.e. they are vague.

Research on semantic and pragmatic vagueness investigates in what context expressions are vague and what context helps to disambiguate a vague expression. For example, Varzi (2001) indicates that “on the semantic conception <...> ‘Sebastian’s walk’ is vague only insofar as it vaguely designates an event” (Varzi 2001, p. 142), that is, if the event itself is vague, then the phrase becomes vague too.

Higher-order vagueness, as defined by Barker (2006), is “the crisp possibilities: a vague predicate clearly applies, it clearly fails to apply, or it neither applies nor fails to apply.” (Barker 2006, p. 297). There can be two levels of uncertainty, i.e. not only uncertainty where the border between two items (e.g. *small* vs. *not small*) runs, but also uncertainty about the border between *clearly small* and *borderline small*. In other words, higher-order vagueness can be considered a borderline case of a borderline case.

### Vagueness versus linguistic ambiguity

Though “[i]n a colloquial sense, both vagueness and ambiguity are employed generically to indicate indeterminacy” (Poscher 2012, p. 129), the two linguistic devices should be treated as distinct from each other. For example, a word *tall* is not ambiguous, because the adjective implies only one meaning, but it is vague because the boundaries of the adjective are unclear (Keefe 2003). Ambiguity thus “is probably the most accessible concept” (Poscher 2012, p. 129) because its disambiguation does not pose many problems while vagueness is a fundamental problem of meaning, because there are no proper theories for solving the Sorites Paradox or borderline cases.

## Data and methodology

Data for the study – 100 British proverbs – were chosen using a simple random sampling method applied to the proverbs on the Internet page ‘Learn English Today’<sup>1</sup>. They were grouped into three main subgroups: proverbs containing linguistic ambiguity, examples with vagueness, and sentences employing both linguistic ambiguity and vagueness. A mixed research method was used to analyse frequencies and possible purposes of the linguistic devices in the British proverbs.

## Findings and discussion

The analysis of the selected British proverbs has shown that 64 proverbs contain either linguistic ambiguity or vagueness: 26 proverbs are linguistically ambiguous, and 24 are vague (see *Table 1*).

Table 1. Number of Ambiguous and Vague Proverbs

<b>Proverbs in total</b>		100
<b>Proverbs employing either linguistic ambiguity or vagueness</b>		64
<b>Proverbs free of linguistic ambiguity and vagueness</b>		36
<b>Linguistically ambiguous proverbs:</b>		26
	Lexically ambiguous proverbs	10
	Syntactically ambiguous proverbs	6
	Contextually ambiguous proverbs	10
<b>Vague proverbs:</b>		24
	Lexically vague proverbs	19
	Semantically/pragmatically vague proverbs	4
	Lexically and semantically/ pragmatically vague proverbs	1
<b>Linguistically ambiguous and vague proverbs</b>		14

**Linguistically ambiguous proverbs:** Among 26 ambiguous proverbs, ten contain lexical, six syntactic, and ten contextual ambiguities. They help to highlight similarities between objects and/or animate beings as well as to provide the proverb with additional, sometimes humorous or educational meaning.

In the proverbs, lexical ambiguity is created by different ambiguous parts of speech. This type of ambiguity sometimes overlaps with contextual or syntactic ambiguities but as the main cause of ambiguous effects is a word or phrase, they were assigned to the category of lexically ambiguous proverbs.

Example (1) illustrates a double case of lexical ambiguity. Two words, *masters* and *serve*, can have several meaning. The former may refer to a person with great skills in an area or a person in control, while the latter could refer to providing some services / products or to giving somebody food or drinks.

- (1) **No man can serve two masters.** (It is impossible to follow instructions from two different sources).

Not only words, but phrases may cause ambiguous effect on a proverb as well (2):

- (2) **Mark, learn and inwardly digest.** (Note and reflect upon something in order to thoroughly assimilate it).

The phrase *inwardly digest* is ambiguous because it may be understood in two different ways: to secretly process food in your body or to think about something in order to fully understand it. However, as the ambiguous phrase appears with the verbs *mark* and *learn*, an interlocutor would likely reject the first possible meaning and thus reduce the ambiguous effect of the phrase.

Six proverbs out of 26 are syntactically ambiguous. This type of ambiguity is created by reference assignment, ellipsis, and attachment of modifiers. It has been noted that in some cases syntactic ambiguity overlaps with other types of the phenomenon. For instance, (3) proves that ambiguity may rise due to false reference assignment. It is ambiguous, because the second pronoun *he* may refer either to the same person as the first pronoun *he* or to another person thus creating two possible understandings of the uttered phrase.

- (3) **He can who believes he can.** (If you believe you can do something, you will be able to do it).

In sentence (4) syntactic ambiguity is created by ellipsis. It is not clear what or who is served: (a) the first person to come in is the first one to be made into a meal and served or (b) the first person to come in is the first one to receive a meal.

- (4) **First come, first served.** (The first person in the line will be attended first).

Lastly, attachment of modifiers is another possible cause of syntactic ambiguity (5). The prepositional phrase *by the company he keeps* in sentence (5) may be the agent of the action or an instrument. The first scenario suggests that the company of a man in question knows him, the other interpretation may be that the company a man in question is with defines him as a human being.

- (5) **(A) man is known by the company he keeps.** (A person's character is judged by the type of people with whom they spend their time).

Ten out of 26 proverbs are contextually ambiguous. This type of the phenomenon may overlap with other types of ambiguity – lexical and syntactic – but if ambiguity arises from the context and meaning shifts are involved, the ambiguous sentence is dealt as contextually ambiguous.

The literal meanings of some contextually ambiguous proverbs may appear to be logical and fit the context of utterance but the metaphorical meaning is possible as well. In (6), *vessels*, specifically the empty ones, are said to make the most noise. The literal meaning of the sentence may fit the context of utterance if, for example, those vessels are put in a car and carried somewhere but the metaphorical meaning of the proverb is different: empty vessels, i.e. silly people, cause the most trouble.

- (6) **Empty vessels make the most noise.** (The least intelligent people are often the most talkative or noisy).

However, denotational meanings of most contextually ambiguous proverbs do not fit the context of utterance and appear to be nonsensical. The denotational meaning of (7) causes difficulty in understanding: *haste* is an inanimate object and cannot do anything, thus a meaning shift is necessary. Considered metaphorically, the proverb may be understood as a warning that if somebody does something in haste, it will go to waste.

- (7) **Haste makes waste.** (If something is done quickly, it may be done carelessly and need to be redone).

Lastly, (8) presents a case of contextual ambiguity because its literal meaning appears to be nonsensical. A person normally is not what he/she eats, unless they are cannibals. However, if a person eats vegetables, he/she does not become one, thus the denotational meaning of the proverb makes no sense. Metaphorically the proverb may be interpreted that food a person consumes has an effect on his/her health.

- (8) **You are what you eat.** (What you eat has an effect on your well-being).

**Vague proverbs:** Out of 24 proverbs 19 are lexically vague, four are syntactically/semantically vague, and one is both lexically and syntactically/pragmatically vague. Vagueness is caused by truth-value, borderline cases, and the Sorites Paradox.

(9) presents an example of vague adjective *sweetest*. As well as other adjectives, *sweetest* allows borderline cases and depends on the matter of perspective.

- (9) **Stolen pleasures are the sweetest.** (What is forbidden is the most tempting).

Adverbs, similarly to adjectives, allow borderline cases thus they are vague. Examples (10) and (11) contain vague adverbs *hardest* and *far*. As their boundaries are not clear, the adverbs are vague.

- (10) **The first step is the hardest.** (The most difficult part of an action is the beginning).

- (11) **The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.** (Children resemble their parents).

Only one example of a vague noun has been observed. (12) contains a noun *fool* that is vague due to a borderline case. Similarly to the applicability of adjectives and adverbs, the applicability of nouns may depend on an interlocutor's point of view.

- (12) **"A fool at forty is a fool forever.** (If a person hasn't matured by the age of 40, they never will)."

Modifiers (quantifiers) may give rise to vagueness due to their lack of at least one boundary. For example, in a sentence (13) a phrase *more than once* presents the bottom boundary *one*, but it is not clear how much more. As the exact meaning of the phrase may not be indicated, the phrase is considered to be vague.

- (13) **A flower blooms more than once.** (If you miss an occasion, you can avail yourself of it another time).

Semantically or pragmatically vague proverbs mostly deal with words or phrases that may be unclear within or without a context. Some expressions give rise to borderline cases even though they are used only to indicate an object or action when no exact information is needed. The possibility to apply a borderline case, however, remains. For instance, (14) is semantically/pragmatically vague, because the exact meaning of adjectives *untaught* and *ill-taught* is not required by the context. Normally those adjectives would be interpreted as borderline cases, but as in the proverb they merely indicate the quality of a person without any specifications, no boundaries are needed.

- (14) **Better be untaught than ill-taught.** It is better not to be taught at all than to be taught badly).

Adjectives *drunk* and *sober* in sentence (15) give rise to semantic/pragmatic vagueness as well, because usually they allow borderline cases. Even if interlocutors' points of view on when a person may be considered drunk or sober differ, the meaning of the sentence remains unchanged, because the main focus in the sentence is on the quality itself.

- (15) **What a man says drunk, he thinks sober.** (People speak more freely under the influence of alcohol).

Among all 24 vague proverbs only one contains both lexical and semantic/pragmatic vagueness. Lexical vagueness in the proverb is created by a vague adverb and semantic/pragmatic vagueness by a vague verb. An example encompassing both types of the phenomenon:

- (16) **Look before you leap.** (Consider possible consequences before taking action).

An adverb *before* is lexically vague, because it is not concretely indicated when the interlocutor is supposed to look. In addition to this, a vague verb *leap* denotes an action. It may allow borderline cases but as the main interest is in the action itself, the verb is vague.

**Ambiguous and vague proverbs:** The study shows that 14 per cent of proverbs employ both phenomena and proves that linguistic ambiguity and vagueness may coexist.

As there are different types of both linguistic ambiguity and vagueness, different combinations are possible. For example, (17) is contextually ambiguous because it presents a case of metaphorical meaning shift. The sentence is not to be understood literally as the sea is personified, given human ability to make/create. In addition to this, the example contains two adjectives *calm* and *skilled* that permit borderline cases, i.e. are vague.

- (17) **(A) calm sea does not make a skilled sailor.** (A person shows their competence or ability when difficulties arise).

In (18), metaphorical meaning shift does not personify an inanimate object but compares it with another thus providing it with additional qualities (an "A is B" type of metaphor). Apart from being ambiguous, it contains an adjective *best* that allows borderline cases.



- (18) **The best advice is found on the pillow.** (A good night's sleep may help us find an answer to our problem).

Summing up, British proverbs are devoid of neither linguistic ambiguity nor vagueness: approximately two thirds of the analysed proverbs contain at least one of the linguistic devices. The differences of distribution among various types is more visible in the case of vagueness, while in the case of linguistic ambiguity, it is more level.

## Conclusions

Linguistic ambiguity and vagueness are linguistic phenomena concerned with multiple meanings in a discourse. To cover all the possible types of linguistic ambiguity, it is to be classified into five main types: phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and contextual ambiguity. Vagueness, on the other hand, is to be discerned in three main types: lexical, semantic/pragmatic, and higher-order vagueness.

Linguistically ambiguous expressions have multiple meanings while vague utterances differ in semantics of the possible meanings of the word. Furthermore, ambiguity requires disambiguation and does not create as many problems as vagueness, since it is hardly possible to solve the Sorites Paradox or borderline cases. The third difference is that ambiguity may be multiplied, whereas vagueness may only be intensified. The findings of the study, however, indicate that the two linguistic devices can co-exist.

The results reveal only marginal differences in the quantitative use of these linguistic devices. The study also reports on the most prevalent unintentional use performed by ambiguity and / vagueness. Though the devices are believed to be used for their possible humorous effect or ability to obscure undesirable or possibly offensive meaning, in the proverbs, they are more likely to be used to intensify their educational meaning, persuasiveness and to show their intellectual value.

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## **LINGUISTIC AMBIGUITY VERSUS VAGUENESS IN BRITISH PROVERBS**

### **Summary**

Linguistic ambiguity and vagueness are two phenomena concerned with indeterminate meanings in a language. Even though they share some similarities, they have several differences that are essential for true understanding of linguistic ambiguity and vagueness. The phenomena dominate in most language areas and types of discourses thus proverbs are not an exception. Even though scientists, such as Keiko Tanaka (1994), Achille C. Varzi (2001), Isabel Pedersen (2002), Rosanna Keefe (2003), Christopher Kennedy (2011), Sebastian Löbner (2013), have investigated linguistic ambiguity and vagueness, the exact way how both phenomena operate in language, especially in proverbs, remains unclear.

The study aims to investigate the use of linguistic ambiguity and vagueness in British proverbs. 100 British proverbs randomly selected from the Internet page *Learn English Today* were analysed to prove theoretical claims. In the paper, a mixed research method consisting of both qualitative and quantitative research methods was used to fulfill the aim. The analysis of the data has shown that proverbs may be grouped into three main classes: proverbs containing linguistic ambiguity, examples with vagueness, and sentences employing linguistic ambiguity and vagueness. 64 British proverbs out of 100 employ at least one linguistic phenomenon: 26 examples are ambiguous, 24 are vague, and 14 proverbs employ both linguistic ambiguity and vagueness.

KEY WORDS: linguistic ambiguity, vagueness, British proverbs.

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## **LINGVISTINIS DAUGIAPRASMIŠKUMAS IR NEKONKRETUMAS BRITIŠKOSE PATARLĖSE**

### **Santrauka**

Lingvistinis daugiaprasmiškumas ir nekonkretumas – du fenomenai, susiję su keliomis galimomis ar netiksliomis išsireiškimų reikšmėmis. Nepaisant to, kad daugiaprasmiškumas ir nekonkretumas iš pirmo žvilgsnio atrodo labai panašūs ar net vienodi, iš tiesų jie turi kelis esminius skirtumus, kurie yra būtini norint suprasti šių fenomenų esmę. Daugiaprasmiškumas ir nekonkretumas dominuoja daugelyje kalbos sričių ir stilių, tad patarlės – ne išimtis. Nors daugybė lingvistų, logikų ir filosofų (Tanaka 1994, Varzi 2001, Pedersen 2002, Keefe 2003, Kennedy 2011, Löbner 2013, etc.) tyrinėjo šiuos fenomenus, atsakymas į klausimą, kaip jie funkcionuoja kalboje, ypač patarlėse, dar nerastas.

Šiuo tyrimu siekiama aptarti lingvistinio daugiaprasmiškumo ir nekonkretumo vartojimą britiškose patarlėse. Darbe buvo pasitelktas mišrus tyrimo metodas, apimantis tiek kiekybinį, tiek kokybinį metodą. Medžiaga tyrimui buvo surinkta iš internetinės svetainės *Learn English Today*, o konkretūs pavyzdžiai, siekiant išlaikyti objektyvumą, tyrimui atrinkti naudojant *Random Number Generator*. Pavyzdžiai buvo skaičiuojami, o patarlės, turinčios daugiau nei vieną nekonkrečią ar kelias nekonkrečias reikšmes, buvo atidžiau analizuojamos. Straipsnyje tirti ne tik skirtingi lingvistinio daugiaprasmiškumo ir nekonkretumo tipai, bet ir jų dažnis britiškose patarlėse.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: lingvistinis daugiaprasmiškumas, nekonkretumas, britiškos patarlės

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